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# Transforming the Community, Transforming the Self: Young People, Social Action and Community Leadership

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## Abstract

This article examines the nexus between community, neoliberalism and young people's experiences. It interrogates young people's participation in programmes that seek to engage them in community action and social change by exploring the experiences of young people in a UK leadership programme targeting those from diverse and under-represented backgrounds. The research consisted of four in-depth semi-structured interviews that were analysed using narrative analysis. Participants' experiences demonstrate how programmes seeking to engage young people in transforming their communities are often implicitly engaged in seeking to transform the individual. We examine interviewees' understandings of community and the extent to which they view themselves as agents of change within their communities. We consider how community leadership programmes seek to both facilitate upwardly mobile trajectories and simultaneously contain those trajectories within a geographical area. The research identifies tensions between individual 'success' and social action and argues that these tensions are inherent in programmes operating within a context of ingrained neoliberalism. Furthermore, we explore the extent to which participants are aware of these tensions and how they navigate and negotiate them.

**Keywords:** Community, transformation, social action, neoliberalism, youth trajectories

## The Leadership Programme

Young people, in particular those from lower socio-economic and under-represented backgrounds, often attract the attention of media, policy makers and researchers in relation to dominant and problematic understandings of them as troubled, ‘at risk’ and in need of support (Furlong, 2013; Checkoway et al, 2003). Engaging young people in their local communities is one way in which policymakers and practitioners seek to offer support. As Brent (2004, p.213) has suggested, “community” is a concept that is “constantly invoked as an ‘answer’ to problems of power, voice and social peace”, yet it is an answer that arguably “never arrives”. Internationally there are numerous initiatives – led and funded by charities, governments and youth organisations - that seek to enhance young people’s engagement with their communities via social action, volunteering, mentoring and networking, focusing on social and community cohesion. The *UpRising* leadership programme is one such initiative in the UK and participants of this programme form the focus of this study. The programme provides training sessions with some of the UK’s most senior leaders, offering participants a “unique first-hand view of the way that political, business, public sector and community organisations work together” (UpRising, 2018). Participants, aged between 19 and 25, are individually matched with a coach and mentor and work in a team to “design and deliver a social action campaign on a local issue they are passionate about” (UpRising, 2018). They are encouraged to “transform the world around them through social action” (UpRising, 2018). In this article, we seek to interrogate this process of transformation and examine the complexities of initiatives that aim to engage young people in social and community action. Focusing in-depth on four young peoples’ experiences of *UpRising*, we explore the tensions felt by participants as they reflect on their experiences of completing the programme. We situate participants’ experiences within a broader context of an ingrained neoliberalism in which we argue this programme and others like it are steeped,

exploring motivations for the delivery of such programmes and their intended and unintended consequences.

The *UpRising* Leadership Programme currently runs in London, Birmingham, Cardiff, Manchester as well as Bedfordshire and Luton. The programme took place outside of a city for the first time in Bedford in 2011 and it is Bedford that the participants in this research have been drawn from. The research took place in Bedford because we participated in the *UpRising* programme there ourselves. The ‘insider’ approach taken in the research is discussed in the methodology section of this article. Bedford is approximately an hour from London by train and has been described by Vale (2010, p.7) as “everytown” – arguably a town broadly emblematic of others in the UK. It is a diverse market town in which over 100 languages are spoken and with a mix of urban and rural locales. The town “has many of the cohesion and socio-economic challenges that are typical of an urban environment” as well as “many of the connectivity and isolation challenges typical of rural areas” (Vale, 2010, p.7). Echoing concerns prevalent in many western deindustrialised countries, Vale’s 2010 study of Bedford identified low levels of commitment to the town held by its young occupants. The initial funding of the *UpRising* leadership programme in Bedford was, in part, an attempt to enhance young people’s commitment to their community by engaging them in social action and by encouraging them to aspire to become leaders within the community.

### **Young People and Neoliberalism**

When we refer to the idea of ingrained neoliberalism in this article we are arguing that, as Türken et al (2016, p.32) have suggested, neoliberalism can be understood as a hegemonic discourse “increasingly taken for granted as common sense”. Neoliberalism is understood in a variety of ways in different disciplines and by different thinkers. As Türken et al (2016, p.33) identify, it has been defined and analysed as “ideology, economic-political force,

discourse, historical rationality, and/or governance”. Here, we follow Giroux (2009, p.105) in understanding neoliberalism not only as “a series of market-driven programs but also a coherent set of cultural, political, and educational practices” and, furthermore, as a set of practices that frequently “mobilize communities around shared fears and collective insecurities.” The fears and insecurities referred to here and the relationships between community and neoliberalism are discussed in the next section of this paper, focused on young people and community. Though this definition of neoliberalism is broad and somewhat elusive, it serves to support the argument made by Harvey (2007, p.3) that the consequences of neoliberal practices are both stark and subtle, having had “pervasive effects on ways of thought”. In the context of this paper, we explore the ways in which neoliberalism as common-sense shapes and influences young people’s experiences, specifically in relation to community, education and training, and the self.

There is a growing body of literature examining the ways in which neoliberalism shapes subjectivities (Türken et al, 2016; Walkerdine 2003) in particular in light of neoliberalism as a form of governance or governmentality (Foucault, 2008). Much of this literature draws on the seminal work of Rose (1999), who, when discussing the self in relation to liberalism, outlines how in contemporary western culture it is a necessity that “each individual must render his or her life meaningful as if it were the outcome of individual choices made in furtherance of a biographical project of self-realization” (1999, p.ix). Walkerdine (2003) argues that this necessity and the forms of governance it entails have been intensified by neoliberal practices and the significant changes that have taken place in the labour market globally, which mean that the neoliberal subject must continually be *at work* in the processes of self-reinvention. Young people, indeed all neoliberal subjects, are increasingly seen as “responsible” for their own “successes and failures” (Türken et al, p.34). In an economy in which “jobs for life” are increasingly rare, autonomous and flexible

subjects are “demanded to be able to cope with constant change in work, income and lifestyle and with constant insecurity” (Walkerdine, 2003, p.240). Neoliberal times “demand a subject who is capable of constant self-invention” (Walkerdine, 2003, p.240). In a study of young people as subjects of neoliberal governance, Pimlott-Wilson (2016, p.290) identifies how one consequence of the requirement to conform to an idealised subjectivity is that anxiety is created among “those who cannot, or do not, conform to neoliberal benchmarks of success”. As will be discussed later in this article, another consequence of this need for flexibility in the face of insecurity is that young people are increasingly required to be geographically mobile. As Walkerdine (2003, p.241) argues, the ideal neoliberal subject is “a subject who can cope without strong community roots or ties”. It is such a subject, flexible, mobile and able to regularly reinvent, which “is presumed by, as well as being the intended product of, contemporary forms of education and training” (Walkerdine, 2003, p.240). Accordingly, our analysis of the experiences of young people engaged in a community leadership programme explores the sometimes contradictory and competing consequences and aims of ingrained neoliberalism and of community development.

### **Young People and Community**

Stahl and Habib (2017, p.2) identify how, within a milieu saturated by neoliberal ideologies privileging upward mobility, attachment to place, in particular working-class attachment, “often connotes stagnation, ambivalence, defeat and failure”. Community leadership programmes such as *UpRising* represent an interesting challenge to this view in that they seek to address, in the contexts in which they operate, what Cohen (1972, p.87) described as “a ‘brain drain’ of the most articulate” and the “crisis of indigenous leadership” facing many rural and working-class communities. In the specific case of Bedford, this can be evidenced by the responses given by young people in Vale’s research into the experiences

of the young inhabitants of the town. One participant said, “why would you stay in Bedford when you could go to London?” and another explicitly referred to economic opportunity, stating that “if I want a decent job I’ll have to move” (Vale, 2010, p.39). As MacLeod and Emejuklu (2014, p.431) state, “as a result of the 2008 financial crisis, the United Kingdom is mired in a cycle of low economic growth and declining living standards” and with the dismantling of the welfare state and the rolling out of the “much maligned Big Society initiative”, a “discourse of community empowerment and control” have emerged. Local leadership programmes aimed at those from under-privileged and diverse backgrounds seek, arguably, to reinvigorate relationships between young people and the places they inhabit. They seek to manage the trajectories of young people, orienting them upward but also seeking to contain them within the local community. However, as long economic structuring of the UK ensures that the majority of opportunities for young people are in London and, to a lesser extent, other major cities, these aims will be difficult to achieve. Similarly, as long as the idealised and normative neoliberal subject is one that, as Walkerdine (2003, p.241) describes, is without “strong community roots or ties”, any initiatives aimed at developing the relationship between young people and the communities they live face significant structural challenges.

Youth leadership programmes also tend to be reliant on discourses surrounding young people, community and volunteering that reinforce the assumption that engagement in voluntary work and social action will result in young people becoming “productive citizens” who are connected to their communities (Nenga, 2012, p.1063). Harris et al have argued (2010, p.12) that young people are “increasingly targeted by civic education campaigns or regimes of responsibilisation that construct them as inadequate citizens”. This argument could be applied to the vast majority of education and training opportunities operating within the context of what we term ingrained neoliberalism and relates to the

broader context of what Jayasuriya (2002, p.312) refers to as “welfare contractualism” or “neo-liberal contractualism”. Jayasuriya (2002) utilises these terms to refer to a shift in social policy toward a model in which the individual as active agent is central to welfare structures. Though, as Jayasuriya (2002, p.315) states, an emphasis on agency is in many ways positive, it is also problematic in that it is “the ideal of a responsible and competent agent that underpins much of the normative rationale of contractualism”. Welfare contractualism is “situated within a rather distinctive moral sociology which seeks to lay out proper modes of social conduct” (Jayasuriya, 2002, p.312), not only asking the individual to be an active agent but to change in order to adhere to the model image and behaviours of an idealised subject. The idealised subject of welfare contractualism is similar to Walkerdine’s (2003) idealised subject of neoliberalism. *UpRising* is a registered charity and an example of the kind of programme encouraged by the Big Society initiative, so has a complex relationship to social policy. Though *UpRising* is explicit in expressing the ambition to ‘transform’ communities it is less explicit about the ways in which it might seek to transform the individual. As the participants’ contributions later in this article demonstrate, the process of transformation and change they describe is constructed both in relation to their community and in relation to themselves.

Community, like neoliberalism, is a term that evades concrete definition. There is, as Delanty (2010) identifies, an unavoidable dimension of normativity to any claim to community. We wish to acknowledge, as Yerbury (2011, p.185) does in her study of young people’s vocabularies of community, that there is “no single interpretation of the concept of community”. In their focus on community involvement, programmes aimed at the development of young people in a given locale inevitably play a part in the construction of a local community that can be understood, drawing on Anderson (1983), as imaginary. The emphasis of *UpRising* and programmes like it on facilitating participants to transform the



world around them through social action also responds to an underlying concern about the impingement of social problems on the wellbeing of the community, inevitably drawing on and reinforcing certain assumptions about ‘community’ as positive, inclusive, utopian and itself ‘at risk’. Storrie (2004, p.53) suggests the “notion of local communal space is itself fast becoming a nostalgic utopia” in a deindustrialised west where it seems “very difficult for the ordinary citizen...to feel anything other than powerless in the face of the wider world of stranger, more threatening and uncontrollable events”. Specifically in relation to young people, Giddens (2009, p.823) argues that their supposed declining engagement in civic organisations “may well signal a lower commitment to their communities”. Harris et al (2010, p.10) also articulate the tendency, in a globalised world, to view young people as disengaged from “traditional modes of affiliation and participation”, though they are more reluctant to assert that this is necessarily the case. They explain that in the Australian context schools have introduced civics programmes to encourage engagement and counter this perceived trend. Similar steps have been taken in the UK where, alongside the formal curriculum, charities and government funded organisations run programmes seeking to address these concerns by empowering young people to make change and feel a sense of agency and belonging – the *UpRising* leadership programme being one such initiative. In this context, perhaps the most useful definition of community is Delanty’s (2010, p.xi), as he claims that community “is ultimately what people think it is”. This interpretation of community acknowledges its importance to individuals. We are aware that “ideas of bounded ethnic communities remain important parts of many people’s self-representation and identity” (Alleyne, 2002, p.622) and through critical engagement with the concept of community we do not wish to criticise individual experience or disregard the many positive connotations of the term community. Furthermore, we acknowledge that community is a “politically useful” concept which can “provide a sense of solidarity in the face of social

and political exclusion” (Alleyne, 2002, p.609). As the DEMOS report commissioned by *UpRising* to examine the impact of their leadership programme identified, “a unifying motivation” for participants joining was “to participate in social action and help the wider community” (Birdwell et al, 2015, p.40).

Research also supports the view that involvement in the community benefits young people in myriad ways, even if what is being referred to by the term community remains uncertain (Youniss et al, 1997; Maton 1990). As Nenga (2012) notes, conceptions of community tend not to be defined or deconstructed in the context of prevailing discourses about youth participation and citizenship. The broad concept of community is one which has, according to Mayo (2000, p.37), “featured prominently in debates and in policy initiatives emerging from both ends of the political spectrum” for some time. Bradbury (2009, p.101) states that “in the practical domain” it is often the case that the term community “is given no explicit meaning”. Instead it is used “for the general sympathy it attracts as a legitimising concept for any political programme” (Bradbury, 2009, p.101). Tendencies towards adopting community as a vague and, as Alleyne (2002, p.609) describes, “politically useful” term, become evident in the use of the homogenising phrase ‘our communities’ by *UpRising* (2018) in promotional materials. Through use of the collective pronoun ‘we’ it emphasises the programme’s focus on enhancing young people’s sense of belonging within their communities.

Explicitly, the aim of *UpRising* is to engage young people from diverse and under-represented backgrounds in their communities with the intention that - in the long term - political, business, public sector and community leadership will become more reflective of the diversity of the UK population in terms of gender, ethnicity, ‘race’, religion, sexuality, social class and their many intersections. Implicitly, the programme can also be understood as seeking to address numerous other concerns relating to young people, participation and

citizenship, in particular the perception that young people are disengaged and failing to productively contribute to their communities. Nenga (2012, p.1064) seeks to challenge popular assumptions that young people are disconnected from their communities and explains how volunteering and community work is often positioned as a way for young people who are constructed as on the 'outside' to work their way 'inside'. *UpRising* is arguably a practical example of the way in which community action can be understood, as it is by both Nenga (2012) and Brent (2004, p.214), as potentially 'divisive' – dividing the inside from the outside. This is evident in the approach taken by *UpRising* (2018), whose website describes the 'unique' opportunity for access to "behind the scenes sessions with some of the UK's most senior leaders" – bringing young people from the 'outside' to enter an exclusive 'inside'. The programme's aim to engage young people in democratic participation seeks to address what Checkoway et al (2003, p.300) describe as the perception that young people are "alienated and disengaged from democracy". Though the organisation's name has connotations of revolutionary change and the toppling of the establishment, this is misleading. *UpRising*'s patrons and trustees are often establishment figures including former and current British politicians such as David Cameron, Nick Clegg, Ed Milliband, Rushnara Ali and Nadhim Zahawi as well as private and public-sector leaders. The programme aims to support young people to access positions of power as individuals working *within* dominant and existing frameworks of power and politics, rather than to overthrow or undermine extant political power structures as the programme's title might suggest. In this sense, the programme and others like it are exemplary of ingrained neoliberalism as they seek to propel the individual and support an upwardly mobile life trajectory on the ladder of the status quo.

In their examination of the consequences of neoliberalism for community organising in the US, Brady et al (2014, p.38) highlight how from the 1980s onwards there has been

more of a focus on “working within the system” in community organising projects due to changes in funding and a rise in federally funded initiatives. The same can be said of the UK and *UpRising* specifically has received government funding as well as prominent private, public and charity organisations. *UpRising* is currently funded by the National Lottery, the Cabinet Office, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Social Action Fund and City Bridge Trust among others. *UpRising* has previously been funded by a variety of organisation including J.P.Morgan and The Equality and Human Rights Commission and in Bedford and Luton the programme is funded by the Harpur Trust, as well as other funders (UpRising, 2018). This no doubt has an influence on the programme. Brady et al (2014) highlight that funding and collaboration are important and not without benefits. However, the ways in which neoliberal values promoting “individualism” as well as “reform from solely within the system” have shaped community practice are a concern for Brady et al (2014, p.36). Their analysis critiques the impact of neoliberalism on community organising in part because of its increased focus on the individual rather than on social movements. *UpRising* focuses both on developing the community and on developing the individual. In our experience the programme does seek to utilise its alumni and participants in feeling a part of a broader network, if not a movement. We would wish to highlight at this stage that as graduates of the programme we are both very grateful for the opportunities afforded to us by it, the most significant of which for us was the opportunity to meet new friends and make connections. However, critical reflection on our experiences has allowed us to explore some of the tensions and complexities that exist within them. We share some of these reflections in this article as we draw on the responses of the participants’, who articulate how they themselves have had to navigate the contradictions and tensions perhaps inherent in a programme that seeks to both enhance the community as well facilitate an upwardly mobile trajectory for them as an individual participant.

## Method

As graduates of the leadership programme under discussion we have adopted a self-reflexive and ‘insider’ approach, utilising our own networks to undertake this research. Though we are cognisant that this brings its limitations to the research we also believe it brings strengths. We recognise that the notion “of being a complete insider (or outsider)” is problematic and that any claim to “insider status” is undermined by contemporary theories of subjectivity and identity (Hodkinson, 2005, p.132). According to Schiller et al (2006) insider research can lead to an increased risk of “ethnic bias” whereby a distorted view can be produced from over-emphasising and essentialising certain categories of identity – such as ethnicity or nationality – over other identity groups. Moroşanu (2015) takes this further, highlighting that researchers sharing characteristics such as ethnicity with participants risk a less nuanced appreciation for the variation within such ethnic categories. However, the ‘insider’ status also brings with it a number of potential benefits, such as access, trust and rapport-building as well as familiarity with experiences, although, according to Moroşanu, (2015), this familiarity can also lead to tensions. As Hodkinson (2005, p.132) suggests, ‘insider’ research can be used to designate “ethnographic situations characterised by significant levels of proximity between researcher and researched”. Having been involved as participants and active alumni over the course of six years, this resonates with our own situation in relation to *UpRising*. We acknowledge that neither our own accounts nor the accounts of participants reflect ‘reality’. As Hollway and Jefferson (2013, p. 9) emphasise, contemporary theories of language “stress that any kind of account can only be a mediation of reality”. In attempting to apprehend and interpret our own narratives and those of the participants in this research, we adhere to Griffin and May’s (2012, p.433) view that those “narratives do not give us access to what ‘really’ happened or to underlying psychological motives, but rather they can

be used to show us *how* experiences are reconstructed and interpreted once they have occurred”.

The method adopted for this research is in-depth semi-structured interviews that seek to allow participants to share their own stories. We feel that, though problematic at times, our participation in *UpRising* as a leadership programme has been a significant, positive and transformative experience in our lives. From personal discussions with alumni we understand that the profound impact participation in such programmes can have is closely tied to narratives of the self and to identity. Riessman (2002, p.218) argues that “individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives” and that “these private constructions typically mesh with a community of life stories”. As such we recognise that participation in a programme like *UpRising* is not an experience that can be isolated or compartmentalised by participants. We also share the view of Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992, p.1) that “personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned”. In focusing on participants’ own narrative accounts of their experiences of the programme we seek to demonstrate our commitment to participants’ lived experience and to adopt a narrative approach in the research in order to, as Elliott (2013, p.6) suggests is possible, “empower” participants. We take an idiographic approach, focusing on individual experiences. In practice, this manifests in this article as wherever possible allowing the participants to ‘speak’ for themselves in their own words. In doing so we are aware of the problematic nature of any limited representation of an individual as discussed by Spivak (1994). Drawing on this work, we understand that although we ourselves have experience of the programme and are, in a way, subjects of the research, by writing about the programme and these participants, there has been a shift in the power dynamic. Thus, there

are limitations brought about by our privileged position as authors in writing about our participants (Spivak, 1994).

Four in-depth, semi-structured interviews have been conducted. Interviews were audio recorded with the full informed consent of the participants. The research has ethical approval from the University of Bedfordshire and was carried out in accordance with the Social Research Association ethical guidelines. The focus on individual experience and personal narratives is why we chose to use a small sample with alumni from three different cohorts of the *UpRising* leadership programme in Bedford. Participants were approached on an individual basis and they selected their own pseudonyms. In terms of analysis, as we were interested in understanding meaning and “how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences” (Griffin & May, 2012, p.442), we adopted a narrative approach and included accounts in the participants’ own words. To organise our findings, we presented participants’ narratives thematically for pragmatic reasons whilst relating them to participants’ narratives as a whole. Furthermore, in our analysis we were conscious that these narratives are “created” rather than found and that an interview is between “two active participants” generating meaning collectively rather than in a one-directional facilitator and respondent dynamic (Riessman, 2008, p.23).

Due to the selection criteria of the leadership programme, which seeks to open “pathways to power for talented young people from diverse and under-represented backgrounds” (UpRising, 2018), the participants represent diverse backgrounds in terms of socio-economic status, gender, ‘race’, ethnicity, religion and sexuality. We have chosen not to divulge information about these facets of participants’ identities. This is partly in the interest of maintaining anonymity. The cohort of graduates from the programme remains, in Bedford, relatively small, and therefore any information that might allow for their identification is omitted. We were also concerned that to disclose such information about

participants could risk essentialising their experiences. We do not believe that the views and experiences of individual participants can be representative of the experience of the groups they identify with, nor those that they are identified with by others. Furthermore, any passing reference to ‘race’, ethnicity, religion, sexuality or socio-economic background would inevitably fail to account for the full complexity and intersectionality of participants’ identities. As Brah (1996, p.188) has discussed, discourses about minority groups often become “an alibi for pathologized representation” of those groups. Similarly, Cornwall (2008, p.277) has emphasised how “all too often, the use of categories to distinguish between different segments of ‘the community’ leads outside agencies to treat these categories as unproblematic and bounded units” when those places into categories “may not see themselves in these terms at all”. We acknowledge that this approach could itself be interpreted as ideologically neoliberal, due to the focus being solely on the ‘individual’ without reference to structural factors shaping participants’ experiences, and it continues to be a point of much discussion between us as the authors. We do identify the participants’ gender identification through the use of gendered pronouns.

### **Participants’ Changed Views of the Town**

When asked whether engagement in the leadership programme had altered their attitudes toward the town they inhabited, the four participants responded:

*Matthew:* it definitely widened my horizons about the kind of things that are happening here

*Ricky:* it sort of broadened my thinking about Bedford quite a lot and put me in touch with quite a lot of people actually who I wouldn’t ordinarily been in touch with

*Galore:* It showed me more opportunities are out there, things that weren’t on my agenda



*Demetria:* I feel more a part of the community...my position is a lot more established than it was before.

Ricky grew up in Bedford and left to study for a degree. He explained in more depth how taking part has altered his view of the town:

*Ricky:* I was born and raised in Bedford and spent most of my life there. Going back to a small place, maybe in my mind, my own prejudices against Bedford...a small market town, you wouldn't associate it with a place of opportunity...if people want to go out and explore and broaden their horizons, they do that by leaving Bedford...I didn't want to come back...Knowing Bedford. Well, I thought I knew Bedford actually, whereas through *UpRising* I found this whole other side that I didn't know about which is surprising.

Matthew had been living in Bedford for two years as a student when he took part.

*Matthew:* I realised that there's a lot more going on...you have a newfound appreciation of Bedford as a place because you know that the people in Bedford actually love Bedford

All participants emphasised the importance of the people they had met on the programme and discussed the ways in which their participation had expanded their social networks.

*Demetria:* you meet all these people from all parts of Bedford and it's like oh I know that person now I'll say hi to them in the street.

*Ricky:* because it's a small place it shouldn't be so hard for people to mix and mingle...but it's hard to find like-minded people, who I only met through *UpRising*.

*Matthew:* I've made friends for life out of it.

*Galore:* The people had a profound effect on me...definitely the people in my life have become such an influence to the way that I am and the way that

I have grown and changed...the fact that I have been given the chance to come together with like-minded people, that was everything.

Participants all signalled greater commitment to the town and a greater sense of connectedness and ‘social capital’ within the area (Field, 2008). Though this increased social connectedness is evidently something that the participants deemed positive and we ourselves as participants in *UpRising* have enjoyed, it is also something which can be related to the current climate we refer to as ingrained neoliberalism. All participants discuss discovering new connections and friendships that were, for some, lacking in their previous experience of the town. Developing networking skills was also a key element of the programme. However, it is arguably the “complete collapse of civil society” discussed by Walkerdine (2003, p.241) that necessitates a “desire to make subjects” who are “responsible for their own lives through networks of ‘social capital’”, able to cope without the ties of a permanent community. Though the programme enabled the development of connections and ties within the town, the networking skills developed must be put to use continually by the “self-reliant, flexible and mobile individuals who conform to neoliberal ideals” (Pimlott-Wilson, 2016). Indeed, it is notable that six months on from the initial data collection, three of the four participants had moved from the town to pursue employment opportunities and the fourth planned to undertake postgraduate study abroad. Similarly, both researchers have since left the town. This suggests that community leadership programmes such as *UpRising* may be effective in encouraging young people to enhance their commitment to their locale, but also suggests that the structural factors shaping employment opportunities have a more significant impact on influencing those young people’s trajectories. Any attempt to support belonging within a community and to open up opportunities in a specific geographical area is undermined by the neoliberal milieu in which, as Walkerdine (2003) argues, subjects must

be flexible and able to cope with constant change that might frequently be felt both in terms of employment and geography.

### **Making Change Happen**

Evans (2007) emphasises how taking part in community action can support young people to experience themselves as capable and powerful, explaining that having opportunities to play meaningful roles in a community can promote a sense of agency and of social responsibility for young people. When asked if he felt he could make change happen, Ricky responded that *UpRising* had taught him “the normal average Joe can do more than they think” and that “there’s power in numbers”. However, he was cynical about the sustainability of the changes that can be enacted by individuals, wondering: “can you empower the local people to carry on with it?” He felt that most people did not feel capable of making change: “people feel quite insignificant like they don’t have any power to change things themselves”. Ricky also reflected on the tensions between individual successes, the success of the programme and the development of the local community. In a mock ‘sound bite’ voice Ricky told us that during his time on the programme he “was intrinsically involved in a symbiotic relationship between my personal wellbeing, happiness and development and that of the community and the people around me”. The tone in which this extract was spoken by Ricky appeared to us sardonic and ‘knowing’, which suggested both an understanding of what he perceived to be the ‘ideal message’ of the success of the programme and cynicism and doubt about the full ‘truthfulness’ of this message. Though Ricky felt the programme had benefited him and the town he also held sceptical and multifaceted views regarding the sustainability and extent of those benefits, feeling that he as an individual had benefited more than the town had.

There is arguably an inherent tension between individual success and collective participation in any programme focused on developing individual leaders and facilitating community action. In the context of ingrained neoliberalism as well as education and

employment conditions that foster “only the concentration on an individual future” and leave “little room for collective political action”, it is arguably all too easy for social action to become little more than a vehicle for individual success (Hackett, 2004, p.75). Demetria explained how having participated in the programme had helped her stand out in a competitive job market: “It’s kind of like my unique selling point...only a select amount of people can say that they’ve done that and rightly or wrongly an employer will be like wow”.

Galore’s experience was more problematic and she emphasised her frustration with what she perceived to be the co-opting of altruistic social action for the gain of others. She disliked:

Almost having to put on this front to portray a certain thing when you just wanted to be doing what you were doing for the good of it rather than...so that you could push it towards getting some more funding for this person or push it towards this looking better for this person.

To some extent, all participants identified a tension between benefiting the town and benefitting the individual, though they by no means suggested that these two things were mutually exclusive. All participants demonstrated a critical awareness of the tensions inherent in initiatives that seek to better the community whilst also seeking to enhance an individual’s skillset, experience and employability, focusing on the individual as both the vehicle of change and that which needs to be changed. They seem to be aware of what Pimlott-Wilson (2016, p.288) refers to as the “individualising political milieu of aspiration” in which young people must endure “emotional burdens” as they seek to “endeavour to achieve a successful future”, and of the demands of an economic and cultural climate in which a flexible, adaptable self-capable of reinvention is venerated (Türken et al, 2016; Walkerdine 2003; Rose 1999).

## **Changing Selves**

Though *UpRising* (2018) as a community leadership programme has a strong emphasis on supporting young people to “transform the world around them” participants in this research reflected on the ways in which they had changed, or had been encouraged to change, as a result of their participation. Demetria explained how *UpRising*:

Made me look at myself...you have to realise that you can't just say that's ok well that person doesn't really like my approach. You have to look at yourself and try and say - ok what can I do differently? Because you can't change someone else but you can try and adapt yourself.

Ricky recalled an experience of being encouraged to understand that it was easier to change one's own behaviour than that of others. He recounted being given feedback after a high-profile event, being told that his comments had been ‘too critical’ of the person in authority he had met. He explained how he felt afterwards:

[UpRising] wanted you to be challenging of people in power or authority, but kind of do it in the right way...they say we want you to be challenging, but if you are challenging in this way, and you disengage with the people you are trying to get to make some sort of change, then you are going to have a negative impact, or negative consequences, rather than positive consequences.

Ricky felt that he learned he had to ‘play the game’ in order to achieve what he wanted. This echoed Galore's narrative, which included reference to “the *UpRising* game” and referred to the idea that it might be necessary to adapt and change in order to at least appear as if you “fitted in” and “belonged” in particular contexts. This approach is both pragmatic and problematic. Cornwall (2008, p.282) has argued that the tendency to tutor people to “speak to power” in ways that are deemed “acceptable” is one of the challenges that needs to be addressed in terms of participation and community development. Though the aim in the case of *UpRising* is arguably vital – to support young people from under-represented

backgrounds to reach positions of power – it may rely on a normative practice that seeks to shape the behaviour of others and can leave individuals feeling inferior for having been encouraged to change.

As alumni of the programme, the idea of “playing the game” resonated with us, and we often discuss the ways in which we make adjustments to our behaviour, appearance and language in different situations. This behaviour could be understood as performative (Butler, 1990) in that these expressions are in relation to conveying oneself in ways deemed acceptable to pre-determined socially constructed categories rather than revealing any ‘true’ or authentic sense of identity – if such a thing indeed exists. Though intuitively we feel that everyone engages in this kind of ‘code switching’ (R.L.G, 2013; Knestrict and Schoensteadt 2005) to some extent, we feel that our experience of the programme has alleviated our guilt about engaging in this kind of ‘acting up’ in different scenarios, for example utilising our biographies, family backgrounds and personal experiences to our advantage. Having engaged in sessions such as ‘personal branding’ and ‘power and influence’ as well as networking events that result in individual feedback, we have been encouraged to engage in the neoliberal process of thinking carefully about ourselves as ‘projects’ and about our behaviour in relation to different audiences and different agendas (Walkerdine, 2003; Rose 1999; Giddens 1991). Our personal responses to this are marked by contradiction and ambivalence, as we feel both more confident in taking this approach but also have a heightened awareness of it as problematic. This is because it implies there is a ‘certain kind of person’ who can be successful – a normative middle-class and often male subject – and that there are times when your non-normative subjectivity can be utilised to your advantage in a context in which ‘difference’ has been commodified and debates about ‘tokenism’ abound. Changing, adapting and taking a flexible approach to the self and ‘playing the game’

serve to perpetuate and maintain social systems and power structures that see certain subjects as deficient, and others as desirable.

Demetria also stated that she felt she had learned to “play by the rules” in order to get where she wanted to be. Her experiences reinforce the ways in which, as Brady et al (2014, p.36) have highlighted, community related practice in the context of neoliberalism is frequently focused on “reform from solely within the system”:

UpRising helps you know the rules so you can play by the rules so you can get where you want to be. I don't think it changes the rules or makes a different path. There are certain things they'll do indirectly...for example they're not telling you to dress a certain way but they are putting emphasis on the type of people who will be there...I think they are saying use the skills to get noticed then when you get into a certain position you can push out what you need to do but to get there you need to be a certain way...

However not all participants saw this approach as pragmatic. Galore did not appreciate what she perceived to be the ‘steering’ of her presentation and behaviour on the programme, explaining how:

You were kind of taught that you need to schmooze or you need to behave in a certain way. Or you need to do this or do that. Why can't I just be myself? What was wrong with being myself?

For one high-profile event where she would be representing *UpRising* and seeking support for her social action campaign she recalled being told:

you have to dress very nice...do you have something nice? Do you need to get something? As if what I thought was nice wouldn't be right...what conversation topics can be covered...I was being told to question myself because what I would present wasn't good enough...it was the accusation in their voice of me not having something appropriate to say and therefore needing ...steering from them to be able to be appropriate. A lot of times

they made me feel uncomfortable, but then again powerful. Make yourself gain strength. So there's always that. If I could go back I would do it all again. Use it for my own agenda rather than being used for someone else's agenda.

Galore's narrative echoes the observations of Nenga (2012) and Harris, Wyn and Younes (2010) that young people are often constructed as inadequate and in need of change by supplementary educational programmes. Although this experience also seemed to enhance Galore's own sense of resilience and agency as she felt she "gained strength" and became more "powerful" as a result, she was aware of the implicit focus on changing the individual that, evidenced both in this data and existing academic literature, seems pervasive in programmes aimed at young people.

## **Conclusions**

Through exploring the nuanced understandings expressed in the complicated and sometimes contradictory narratives of these participants' experiences of a community leadership programme, we were able to interrogate themes of community and change. We have also examined some of the ways in which what we term ingrained neoliberalism shapes young people's experiences. Tensions between 'bettering the community' and advancing participants' own individual life trajectories were apparent, as were tendencies for education and training programmes to have implicit aims relating to transforming the individual into the idealised flexible, adaptable and always-ready-to-reinvent idealised subject of neoliberalism (Walkerline, 2003). In a highly individualised personal development programme social change is perhaps almost inevitably second to individual change. Given the range of experiences explored in this article, this is certainly not always to be construed negatively. Community leadership programmes are arguably more likely to reproduce than transform the power structures within a community as participants are encouraged to



conform to the status quo in order to make change happen from the ‘inside’, in particular when those programmes are funded and supported by those with an interest in maintaining extant power structures. However, Miles argues that “youth research often shies away from explicitly recognizing that young people most commonly find themselves in a position where they reproduce dominant power structures as to do so would undermine the critical habitus of the sociological imagination” (2015, p.111). In encouraging young people to ‘play the game’ and adapt their behaviour, community leadership programmes may play a significant role in encouraging some young people to conform to the status quo and reproduce dominant power structures – even when, as discussed in this article, the title of the specific programme considered (*UpRising*) implies a more radical approach. Similarly, whether intentionally or unintentionally, contemporary education and training programmes such as *UpRising* tend to presume and produce, as Walkerdine (2003, p.240) has argued, the idealised subject of neoliberalism. As Brady et al (2014) have similarly argued, one consequence of neoliberalism on community organising has been an increased focus on the individual rather than on social movements. This becomes problematic when, as Pimlott-Wilson (2016) outlines, those who cannot or do not wish to conform are left with a feeling of anxiety, unease or deficiency. Furthermore, as Pimlott-Wilson (2016, p.288) also outlines, approaches focused on the individual can serve to erase, ignore and excuse the “broader inequalities that characterise the contemporary climate and powerfully shape the life chance of young people”.

Arguably a key aim of many community leadership programmes for young people is to manage upwardly mobile trajectories for participants within their own communities. The experiences of the participants featured in this article suggest that due to the structural, social and economic conditions that mean towns and smaller communities can have less to offer in terms of employment opportunities, leadership positions and economic

advancement, there is a tendency for programmes like this to have the unintended consequence of enabling the young people who complete them to ‘stand out’ in the wider job market and gain employment outside of the community. Our own personal experiences of the programme also support this. We both gained significantly on a personal level and though we do feel we contributed to the community through our social action campaigns and became more connected to the town with an enhanced sense of belonging during the time we lived there, *UpRising* has also played a key part in our personal, social and career development in a way that has in the long term led us away from Bedford. Our experiences and those of the young people explored in this article highlight the broader contexts of the employment challenges facing young people who wish to remain within a particular locale, as the reasons cited for leaving were predominantly economic and related to career progression. Though community-based leadership programmes can lead to enhanced outcomes for individuals, they can do little to alleviate the broader challenges faced by young people seeking economic opportunities and leadership roles if there are few available within the community itself.

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